KING COLE

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Rosas
Gallipoli
Right Royal
The Faithful
Selected Poems
Lost Endeavour
A Mainsail Haul
Captain Magaret
Reynard the Fox
The Daffodil Fields
The Old Front Line
Multitude and Solitude
Collected Poems and Plays
Salt Water Poems and Ballads
Good Friday and Other Poems
The Tragedy of Pompey the Great
Philip the King and Other Poems
The Tragedy of Nan and Other Poems
Lollingdon Downs and Other Poems
The Story of a Round-House and Other Poems
The Locked Chest; and The Sweeps of Ninety-eight
The Everlasting Mercy and the Widow in the Bye Street

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JOHN MASEFIELD

WITH DRAWINGS IN BLACK AND WHITE

BY

JUDITH MASEFIELD

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To

MY WIFE

KING COLE

King Cole was King before the troubles came,
The land was happy while he held the helm,
The valley-land from Condicote to Thame,
Watered by Thames and green with many an elm.
For many a year he governed well his realm,
So well-beloved, that, when at last he died,
It was bereavement to the countryside.

So good, so well-beloved, had he been
In life, that when he reached the judging-place
(There where the scales are even, the sword keen),

The Acquitting Judges granted him a grace,
Aught he might choose, red, black, from king to ace,
Beneath the bright arch of the heaven's span;
He chose, to wander earth, the friend of man.

So, since that time, he wanders shore and shire,
An old, poor, wandering man, with glittering eyes
Helping distressful folk to their desire
By power of spirit that within him lies.
Gentle he is, and quiet, and most wise,
He wears a ragged grey, he sings sweet words,
And where he walks there flutter little birds.

And when the planets glow as dusk begins
He pipes a wooden flute to music old.
Men hear him on the downs, in lonely inns,
In valley woods, or up the Chiltern wold;
His piping feeds the starved and warms the cold,
It gives the beaten courage; to the lost
It brings back faith, that lodestar of the ghost.

And most he haunts the beech-tree-pasturing chalk,
The Downs and Chilterns with the Thames between.
There still the Berkshire shepherds see him walk,
Searching the unhelped woe with instinct keen,
His old hat stuck with never-withering green,
His flute in poke, and little singings sweet
Coming from birds that flutter at his feet.

Not long ago a circus wandered there,
Where good King Cole most haunts the public way,
Coming from Reading for St. Giles's Fair
Through rain unceasing since Augustine's Day;
The horses spent, the waggons splashed with clay,
The men with heads bowed to the wester roaring,
Heaving the van-wheels up the hill at Goring.

Wearily plodding up the hill they went,
Broken by bitter weather and the luck,
Six vans, and one long waggon with the tent,
And piebald horses following in the muck,

Dragging their tired hooves out with a suck,
And heaving on, like some defeated tribe
Bound for Despair with Death upon their kibe.

All through the morn the circus floundered thus,
The nooning found them at the Crossing Roads,
Stopped by an axle splitting in its truss.
The horses drooped and stared before their loads.
Dark with the wet they were, and cold as toads.
The men were busy with the foundered van,
The showman stood apart, a beaten man.

He did not heed the dripping of the rain,
Nor the wood's roaring, nor the blotted hill,
He stood apart and bit upon his pain,
Biting the bitter meal with bitter will.
Focussed upon himself, he stood, stock still,
Staring unseeing, while his mind repeated,
"This is the end; I'm ruined; I'm defeated."

From time to time a haggard woman's face
Peered at him from a van, and then withdrew;

Within the cowboy's van the rat-eyed wife,
Her reddish hair in papers twisted close,
Turned wet potatoes round against the knife,
And in a bucket dropped the peelèd Oes.

Seeds from the hayrack blew about the place,
The smoke out of the waggon chimneys blew,
From wicker creel the skinny cockerel crew.
The men who set the floundered axle straight
Glanced at their chief, and each man nudged his mate.

And one, the second clown, a snub-nosed youth,
Fair-haired, with broken teeth, discoloured black,
Muttered, "He looks a treat, and that's the truth.
I've had enough: I've given him the sack."
He took his wrench, arose, and stretched his back,
Swore at a piebald pony trying to bite,
And rolled a cigarette and begged a light.

Within, the second's wife, who leaped the hoops,
Nursed sour twins, her son and jealousy,
Thinking of love, in luckier, happier troupes
Known on the roads in summers now gone by
Before her husband had a roving eye,
Before the rat-eyed baggage with red hair
Came to do tight rope and make trouble there.

Beside the vans, the clown, old Circus John,
Growled to the juggler as he sucked his briar,
"How all the marrow of a show was gone
Since women came, to sing and walk the wire,
Killing the clown his act for half his hire,
Killing the circus trade: because," said he,
"Horses and us are what men want to see."

The juggler was a young man shaven-clean,
Even in the mud his dainty way he had,
Red-cheeked, with eyes like boxer's, quick and keen,
A jockey-looking youth with legs besprad,
Humming in baritone a ditty sad,
And tapping on his teeth his finger-nails,
The while the clown suckt pipe and spat his tales.

Molly, the singer, watched him wearily
With big black eyes that love had brimmed with tears,
Her mop of short cut hair was blown awry,
Her firm mouth shewed her wiser than her years.
She stroked a piebald horse and pulled his ears,

And kissed his muzzle, while her eyes betrayed
This, that she loved the juggler, not the jade.

And growling in a group the music stood
Sucking short pipes, their backs against the rain,
Plotting rebellion in a bitter mood,
"A shilling more, or never play again."
Their old great coats were foul with many a stain,
Weather and living rough had stamped their faces,
They were cast clerks, old sailors, old hard cases.

Within the cowboy's van the rat-eyed wife,
Her reddish hair in papers twisted close,
Turned wet potatoes round against the knife,
And in a bucket dropped the peelèd Oes.
Her little girl was howling from her blows,
The cowboy smoked and with a spanner whackt
The metal target of his shooting act.

And in another van more children cried
From being beaten or for being chid

By fathers cross or mothers haggard-eyed,
Made savage by the fortunes that betide.
The rain dripped from the waggons: the drops glid
Along the pony's flanks; the thick boots stamped
The running muck for warmth, and hope was damped.

Yet all of that small troupe in misery stuck,
Were there by virtue of their nature's choosing
To be themselves and take the season's luck,
Counting the being artists worth the bruising.
To be themselves, as artists, even if losing
Wealth, comfort, health, in doing as they chose,
Alone of all life's ways brought peace to those.

So there below the forlorn woods, they grumbled,
Stamping for warmth and shaking off the rain.
Under the foundered van the tinkers fumbled,
Fishing the splitted truss with wedge and chain.
Soon, all was done, the van could go again,

Men cracked their whips, the horses' shoulders forged
Up to the collar while the mud disgorged.

So with a jangling of their chains they went,
Lean horses, swaying vans and creaking wheels,
Bright raindrops tilting off the van roof pent
And reedy cockerels crying in the creels,
Smoke driving down, men's shouts and children's squeals,
Whips cracking, and the hayrack sheddings blowing;
The Showman stood aside to watch them going.

What with the rain and misery making mad,
The Showman never saw a stranger come
Till there he stood, a stranger roughly clad
In ragged grey of woollen spun at home.
Green sprigs were in his hat, and other some
Stuck in his coat; he bore a wooden flute,
And redbreasts hopped and carolled at his foot.

It was King Cole, who smiled and spoke to him.

King Cole: The mend will hold until you reach a wright.
Where do you play?

The Showman: In Wallingford to-night.

King Cole: There are great doings there.

The Showman: I know of none.

King Cole: The Prince will lay the Hall's foundation stone
This afternoon: he and the Queen are there.

The Showman: Lord, keep this showman patient, lest he swear.

King Cole: Why should you swear? Be glad; your town is filled.

The Showman: What use are crowds to me with business killed?

King Cole: I see no cause for business to be crosst.

The Showman: Counter-attractions, man, at public cost.

Fireworks, dancing, bonfires, soldiers, speeches.
In all my tour along the river's reaches
I've had ill-luck: I've clashed with public feasts.
At Wycombe fair, we met performing beasts,
At Henley, waxworks, and at Maidenhead
The Psyche woman talking with the dead.
At Bray, we met the rain, at Reading, flood,
At Pangbourne, politics, at Goring, mud.
Now here, at Wallingford, the Royal Pair.
Counter-attraction killing everywhere,

Killing a circus dead: God give me peace;
If this be living, death will be release.
By God, it brims the cup; it fills the can.
What trade are you?

King Cole: I am a wandering man.

The Showman: You mean, a tramp who flutes for bread and pence?

King Cole: I come, and flute, and then I wander thence.

The Showman: Quicksilver Tom, who couldn't keep his place.

King Cole: My race being run, I love to watch the race.

The Showman: You ought to seek your rest.

King Cole: My rest is this,
The world of men, wherever trouble is.

The Showman: If trouble rests you, God! your life is rest.

King Cole: Even the sun keeps moving, east to west.

The Showman: Little he gets by moving; less than I.

King Cole: He sees the great green world go floating by.

The Showman: A sorry sight to see, when all is said. Why don't you set to work?

King Cole: I have no trade.

The Showman: Where is your home?

King Cole: All gone, a long time past.

The Showman: Your children then?

King Cole: All dead, sir, even the last. I am a lonely man; no kith nor kin.

The Showman: There is no joy in life when deaths begin, I know it, I. How long is't since you ate?

King Cole: It was so long ago that I forget.

The Showman: The proverb says a man can always find

One sorrier than himself in state and mind.
'Fore George, it's true. Well, come, then, to the van.
Jane, can you find a meal for this poor man?

"Yes," said his wife. "Thank God, we still are able
To help a friend; come in, and sit to table."
"Come," said her man, "I'll help you up aboard,
I'll save your legs as far as Wallingford."

They climbed aboard and sat; the woman spread
Food for King Cole, and watched him as he fed.
Tears trickled down her cheeks and much she sighed.
"My son," she said, "like you, is wandering wide,
I know not where; a beggar in the street,
(For all I know) without a crust to eat.
He never could abide the circus life."

They climbed aboard and sat; the woman spread
Food for King Cole, and watched him as he fed.

The Showman: It was my fault, I always tell my wife
I put too great constraint upon his will;
Things would be changed if he were with us still.
I ought not to have forced him to the trade.

King Cole: "A forced thing finds a vent," my father said;
And yet a quickening tells me that your son
Is not far from you now; for I am one
Who feels these things, like comfort in the heart.

The couple watched King Cole and shrank apart,
For brightness covered him with glittering.
"Tell me your present troubles," said the King,
"For you are worn. What sorrow makes you sad?"

The Showman: Why, nothing, sir, except that times are bad,
Rain all the season through, and empty tents,
And nothing earned for stock or winter rents.
My wife there, ill, poor soul, from very grief,
And now no hope nor prospect of relief;
The season's done, and we're as we began.

Now one can bear one's troubles, being a man,
But what I cannot bear is loss of friends.
This troupe will scatter when the season ends:

My clown is going, and the Tricksey Three
Who juggle and do turns, have split with me;
And now, to-day, my wife's too ill to dance,
And all my music ask for an advance.
There must be poison in a man's distress
That makes him mad and people like him less.

Well, men are men. But what I cannot bear
Is my poor Bet, my piebald Talking Mare,
Gone curby in her hocks from standing up.
That's the last drop that overfills the cup.

My Bet's been like a Christian friend for years.

King Cole: Now courage, friend, no good can come from tears.
I know a treatment for a curby hock
Good both for inward sprain or outward knock.
Here's the receipt; it's sure as flowers in spring;
A certain cure, the Ointment of the King.

That cures your mare; your troubles Time will right;
A man's ill-fortune passes like the night.
Times are already mending at their worst;
Think of Spent Simmy when his roof-beam burst.

Well, men are men. But what I cannot bear
Is my poor Bet, my piebald Talking Mare,
Gone curby in her hocks from standing up.
That's the last drop that overfills the cup.
My Bet's been like a Christian friend for years.

His ruined roof fell on him in a rain
Of hidden gold that built it up again.
So, courage, and believe God's providence.
Lo, here, the city shining like new pence,
To welcome you; the Prince is lodging there.
Lo, you, the banners flying like a fair.
Your circus will be crowded twenty deep.
This city is a field for you to reap,
For thousands must have come to see the Prince,
And all are here, all wanting fun. And since
The grass was green, all men have loved a show.
Success is here, so let your trouble go.

The Showman: Well, blessings on your heart for speaking so;
It may be that the tide will turn at last.
But royal tours have crossed me in the past
And killed my show, and maybe will again.
One hopes for little after months of rain,
And the little that one hopes one does not get.

The Wife: Look, Will, the city gates with sentries set.

The Showman: It looks to me as if the road were barred.

King Cole: They are some soldiers of the body-guard.
I hope, the heralds of your fortune's change.

"Now take this frowsy circus off the range,"
The soldiers at the city entrance cried;
"Keep clear the town, you cannot pass inside,
The Prince is here, with other things to do
Than stare at gangs of strollers such as you."

The Showman: But I am billed to play here; and must play.

The Soldiers: No must at all. You cannot play to-day,
Nor pitch your tents within the city bound.

The Showman: Where can I, then?

The Soldiers: Go, find some other ground.

A Policeman: Pass through the city. You can pitch and play
One mile beyond it, after five to-day.

The Showman: One mile beyond, what use is that to me?

A Policeman: Those are the rules, here printed, you can see.

The Showman: But let me see the Mayor, to make sure.

The Soldiers: These are his printed orders, all secure.
Pass through or back, you must not linger here,
Blocking the road with all this circus gear.
Which will you do, then: back or pass along?

The Showman: Pass.

The Soldiers: Then away, and save your breath for song,
We cannot bother with your right and wrong.
George, guide these waggons through the western gate.
Now, march, d'ye hear? and do not stop to bait
This side a mile; for that's the order. March!

The Showman toppled like a broken arch.
The line-squall roared upon them with loud lips.

A green-lit strangeness followed, like eclipse

They passed within, but, when within, King Cole
Slipped from the van to head the leading team.
He breathed into his flute his very soul,
A noise like waters in a pebbly stream,
And straight the spirits that inhabit dream
Came round him, and the rain-squall roared its last
And bright the wind-vane shifted as it passed.

And in the rush of sun and glittering cloud
That followed on the storm, he led the way,
Fluting the sodden circus through the crowd
That trod the city streets in holiday.
And lo, a marvellous thing, the gouted clay,
Splashed on the waggons and the horses, glowed,
They shone like embers as they trod the road.

And round the tired horses came the Powers
That stir men's spirits, waking or asleep,
To thoughts like planets and to acts like flowers,
Out of the inner wisdom's beauty deep:
These led the horses, and, as marshalled sheep
Fronting a dog, in line, the people stared
At those bright waggons led by the bright-haired.

And, as they marched, the spirits sang, and all
The horses crested to the tune and stept
Like centaurs to a passionate festival
With shining throats that mantling criniers swept.
And all the hearts of all the watchers leapt
To see those horses passing and to hear
That song that came like blessing to the ear.

And, to the crowd, the circus artists seemed
Splendid, because the while that singing quired
Each artist was the part that he had dreamed
And glittered with the Power he desired,
Women and men, no longer wet or tired

From long despair, now shone like queens and kings,
There they were crowned with their imaginings.

And with them, walking by the vans, there came
The wild things from the woodland and the mead,
The red stag, with his tender-stepping dame,
Branched, and high-tongued and ever taking heed.
Nose-wrinkling rabbits nibbling at the weed,
The hares that box by moonlight on the hill,
The bright trout's death, the otter from the mill.

There, with his mask made virtuous, came the fox,
Talking of landscape while he thought of meat;
Blood-loving weasels, honey-harrying brocks,
Stoats, and the mice that build among the wheat,
Dormice, and moles with little hands for feet,
The water-rat that gnaws the yellow flag,
Toads from the stone and merrows from the quag.

And over them flew birds of every kind,
Whose way, or song, or speed, or beauty brings
Delight and understanding to the mind;

The bright-eyed, feathery, thready-leggéd things.
There they, too, sang amid a rush of wings,
With sweet, clear cries and gleams from wing and crest,
Blue, scarlet, white, gold plume and speckled breast.

And all the vans seemed grown with living leaves
And living flowers, the best September knows,
Moist poppies scarlet from the Hilcote sheaves,
Green-fingered bine that runs the barley-rows,
Pale candylips, and those intense blue blows
That trail the porches in the autumn dusk,
Tempting the noiseless moth to tongue their musk.

So, tired thus, so tended, and so sung,
They crossed the city through the marvelling crowd.
Maids with wide eyes from upper windows hung,
The children waved their toys and sang aloud.
But in his van the beaten showman bowed
His head upon his hands, and wept, not knowing
Aught of what passed except that wind was blowing.

All through the town the fluting led them on,
But near the western gate King Cole retired;
And, as he ceased, the vans no longer shone,
The bright procession dimmed like lamps expired;
Again with muddy vans and horses tired,
And artists cross and women out of luck,
The sodden circus plodded through the muck.

The crowd of following children loitered home;
Maids shut the windows lest more rain should come;
The circus left the streets of flowers and flags,
King Cole walked with it, huddling in his rags.
They reached the western gate and sought to pass.

"Take back this frowsy show to where it was,"
The sergeant of the gateway-sentry cried;
"You know quite well you cannot pass outside."

The Showman: But we were told to pass here, by the guard.

The Sergeant: Here are the printed orders on the card.
No traffic, you can read. Clear out.

The Showman: But where?

The Sergeant: Where you're not kicked from, or there's room to spare.
Go back and out of town the way you came.

The Showman: I've just been sent from there. Is this a game?

The Sergeant: You'll find it none, my son, if that's your tone.

The Showman: You redcoats; ev'n your boots are not your own.

The Sergeant: No, they're the Queen's; I represent the Queen.

The Showman: Pipeclay your week's accounts, you red marine.

The Sergeant: Thank you, I will. Now vanish. Right-about.

The Showman: Right, kick the circus in or kick it out,
But kick us, kick us hard, we've got no friends,
We've no Queen's boots or busbies on our ends;
We're poor, we like it, no one cares; besides
These dirty artists ought to have thick hides.
The dust, like us, is fit for boots to stamp,
None but Queen's redcoats are allowed to camp
In this free country.

A Policeman: What's the trouble here?

The Showman: A redcoat dog, in need of a thick ear.

The Policeman: The show turned back? No, sergeant, let them through.

They can't turn back, because the
Prince is due.
Best let them pass.

The Sergeant: Then pass; and read the rules
Another time.

The Showman: You fat, red-coated fools.

The Policeman: Pass right along.

They passed. Beyond the town
A farmer gave them leave to settle down
In a green field beside the Oxford road.
There the spent horses ceased to drag the load;
The tent was pitched beneath a dropping sky,
The green-striped tent with all its gear awry.
The men drew close to grumble: in the van
The showman parted from the wandering man.

The Showman: You see; denied a chance; denied
bare bread.

King Cole: I know the stony road that artists
tread.

The Showman: You take it very mildly, if you do.
How would you act if this were
done to you?

King Cole: Go to the Mayor.

The Showman: I am not that kind,
I'll kneel to no Court prop with
painted rind.
You and your snivelling to them
may go hang.
I say: "God curse the Prince and
all his gang."

The Wife: Ah, no, my dear, for Life hurts
everyone,
Without our cursing. Let the poor
Prince be;
We artist folk are happier folk than he,
Hard as it is.

The Showman: I say: God let him see
And taste and know this misery
that he makes.

He strains a poor man's spirit till it breaks,
And then he hangs him, while a poor man's gift
He leaves unhelped, to wither or to drift.
Sergeants at city gates are all his care.
We are but outcast artists in despair.
They dress in scarlet and he gives them gold.

King Cole: Trust still to Life, the day is not yet old.

The Showman: By God! our lives are all we have to trust.

King Cole: Life changes every day and ever must.

The Showman: It has not changed with us, this season, yet.

King Cole: Life is as just as Death; Life pays its debt.

The Showman: What justice is there in our suffering so?

King Cole: This: that not knowing, we should try to know.

The Showman: Try. A sweet doctrine for a broken heart.

King Cole: The best (men say) in every manly part.

The Showman: Is it, by Heaven? I have tried it, I.
I tell you, friend, your justice is a lie;
Your comfort is a lie, your peace a fraud;
Your trust a folly and your cheer a gaud.
I know what men are, having gone these roads.
Poor bankrupt devils, sweating under loads
While others suck their blood and smile and smile.

You be an artist on the roads a while,
You'll know what justice comes with suffering then.

King Cole: Friend, I am one grown old with sorrowing men.

The Showman: The old are tamed, they have not blood to feel.

King Cole: They've blood to hurt, if not enough to heal.
I have seen sorrow close and suffering close.
I know their ways with men, if any knows.
I know the harshness of the way they have
To loose the base and prison up the brave.
I know that some have found the depth they trod

In deepest sorrow is the heart of God.
Up on the bitter iron there is peace.

In the dark night of prison comes release,
In the black midnight still the cock will crow.
There is a help that the abandoned know
Deep in the heart, that conquerors cannot feel.
Abide in hope the turning of the wheel,
The luck will alter and the star will rise.

His presence seemed to change before their eyes.
The old, bent, ragged, glittering, wandering fellow,
With thready blood-streaks in the rided yellow
Of cheek and eye, seemed changed to one who held
Earth and the spirit like a king of eld.

He spoke again: "You have been kind," said he.
"In your own trouble you have thought of me.
God will repay. To him who gives is given,
Corn, water, wine, the world, the starry heaven."

Then, like a poor old man, he took his way
Back to the city, while the showman gazed
After his figure like a man amazed.

The Wife: I think that traveller was an angel sent.

The Showman: A most strange man. I wonder what he meant.

The Wife: Comfort was what he meant, in our distress.

The Showman: No words of his can make our trouble less.

The Wife: O, Will, he made me feel the luck would change.
Look at him, husband; there is something strange

About him there; a robin redbreast comes
Hopping about his feet as though for crumbs,
And little long-tailed tits and wrens that sing
Perching upon him.

The Showman: What a wondrous thing!
I've read of such, but never seen it.

The Wife: Look,
These were the dishes and the food he took.

The Showman: Yes; those were they. What of it?

The Wife: Did he eat?

The Showman: Yes; bread and cheese; he would not touch the meat

The Wife: But see, the cheese is whole, the loaf unbroken,
And both are fresh. And see, another token:—

Those hard green apples that the farmer gave
Have grown to these gold globes, like Blenheims brave;
And look, how came these plums of Pershore here?

The Showman: We have been sitting with a saint, my dear.

The Wife. Look at the butterflies!

Like floating flowers
Came butterflies, the souls of summer hours,
Fluttering about the van; Red Admirals rich,
Scarlet and pale on breathing speeds of pitch,
Brimstones, like yellow poppy petals blown,
Brown ox-eyed Peacocks in their purpled roan,
Blue, silvered things that haunt the grassy chalk,
Green Hairstreaks bright as green shoots on a stalk,
And that dark prince, the oakwood haunting thing
Dyed with blue burnish like the mallard's wing.

"He was a saint of God," the showman cried.

Meanwhile, within the town, from man to man
The talk about the wondrous circus ran.
All were agreed, that nothing ever known
Had thrilled so tense the marrow in their bone.
All were agreed, that sights so beautiful
Made the Queen's court with all its soldiers dull,
Made all the red-wrapped masts and papered strings
Seem fruit of death, not lovely living things.
And some said loudly that though time were short,
Men still might hire the circus for the Court.
And some, agreeing, sought the Mayor's hall,
To press petition for the show's recall.

But as they neared the hall, behold, there came
A stranger to them dressed as though in flame;
An old, thin, grinning glitterer, decked with green,
With thready blood-streaks in his visage lean,
And at his wrinkled eyes a look of mirth
Not common among men who walk the earth;

Yet from his pocket poked a flute of wood,
And little birds were following him for food.

"Sirs," said King Cole (for it was he), "I know
You seek the Mayor, but you need not so;
I have this moment spoken with his grace.
He grants the circus warrant to take place
Within the city, should the Prince see fit
To watch such pastime; here is his permit.
I go this instant to the Prince to learn
His wish herein: wait here till I return."

They waited while the old man passed the sentry
Beside the door, and vanished through the entry.
They thought, "This old man shining like New Spain,
Must be the Prince's lordly chamberlain.
His cloth of gold so shone, it seemed to burn;
Wait till he comes." They stayed for his return.

Meanwhile, above, the Prince stood still to bide
The nightly mercy of the eventide,

Brought nearer by each hour that chimed and ceased.
His head was weary with the city feast
But newly risen from. He stood alone
As heavy as the day's foundation stone.

The room he stood in was an ancient hall.
Portraits of long dead men were on the wall.
From the dull crimson of their robes there stared
Passionless eyes, long dead, that judged and glared.
Above them were the oaken corbels set,
Of angels reaching hands that never met,
Where in the spring the swallows came to build.

It was the meeting chamber of the Guild.

From where he stood, the Prince could see a yard
Paved with old slabs and cobbles cracked and scarred
Where weeds had pushed, and tiles and broken glass
Had fallen and been trodden in the grass.
A gutter dripped upon it from the rain.

"It puts a crown of lead upon my brain

To live this life of princes," thought the Prince.
"To be a king is to be like a quince,
Bitter himself, yet flavour to the rest.
To be a cat among the hay were best;
There in the upper darkness of the loft,
With green eyes bright, soft-lying, purring soft,
Hearing the rain without; not forced, as I,
To lay foundation stones until I die,
Or sign State-papers till my hand is sick.
The man who plaits straw crowns upon a rick
Is happier in his crown than I the King.
And yet, this day, a very marvellous thing
Came by me as I walked the chamber here.
Once in my childhood, in my seventh year,
I saw them come, and now they have returned,
Those strangers, riding upon cars that burned,
Or seemed to burn, with gold, while music thrilled,
Then beauty following till my heart was filled,
And life seemed peopled from eternity.

They brought down Beauty and Wisdom from the sky

Into the streets, those strangers; I could see
Beauty and wisdom looking up at me
As then, in childhood, as they passed below.

Men would not let me know them long ago,
Those strangers bringing joy. They will not now.
I am a prince with gold about my brow;
Duty, not joy, is all a prince's share.

And yet, those strangers from I know not where,
From glittering lands, from unknown cities far
Beyond the sea-plunge of the evening star,
Would give me life, which princedom cannot give.
They would be revelation: I should live.
I may not deal with wisdom, being a king."

There came a noise of someone entering;
He turned his weary head to see who came.

It was King Cole, arrayed as though in flame,
Like a white opal, glowing from within,
He entered there in snowy cramoisin.

The Prince mistook him for a city lord,
He turned to him and waited for his word.

"Sir," said King Cole, "I come to bring you news.
Sir, in the weary life that princes use
There is scant time for any prince or king
To taste delights that artists have and bring.
But here, to-night, no other duty calls,
And circus artists are without the walls.
Will you not see them, sir?"

The Prince: Who are these artists; do they paint or write?

King Cole: No, but they serve the arts and love delight.

The Prince: What can they do?

King Cole: They know full many a rite
That holds the watcher spell-bound, and they know
Gay plays of ghosts and jokes of long ago;

And beauty of bright speed their horses bring,
Ridden barebacked at gallop round the ring
By girls who stand upon the racing team.
Jugglers they have, of whom the children dream,
Who pluck live rabbits from between their lips
And balance marbles on their finger-tips.
Will you not see them, sir? And then, they dance.

"Ay," said the Prince, "and thankful for the chance.
So thankful, that these bags of gold shall buy
Leave for all comers to be glad as I.

And yet, I know not if the Court permits.
King's pleasures must be sifted through the wits

Or want of wit of many a courtly brain.
I get the lees and chokings of the drain,
Not the bright rippling that I perish for."

King Cole: Sir, I will open the forbidden door,
Which, opened, they will enter all in haste.
The life of man is stronger than good taste.

The Prince: Custom is stronger than the life of man.

King Cole: Custom is but a way that life began.

The Prince: A withering way that makes the leafage fall,
Custom, like Winter, is the King of all.

King Cole: Winter makes water solid, yet the spring,
That is but flowers, is a stronger thing.

Custom, the ass man rides, will plod for years,
But laughter kills him and he dies at tears.
One word of love, one spark from beauty's fire,
And custom is a memory; listen, sire.

Then at a window looking on the street
He played his flute like leaves or snowflakes falling,
Till men and women, passing, thought: "How sweet;
These notes are in our hearts like flowers falling."
And then, they thought, "An unknown voice is calling
Like April calling to the seed in earth;
Madness is quickening deadness into birth."

And then, as in the spring when first men hear,
Beyond the black-twigged hedge, the lambling's cry
Coming across the snow, a note of cheer
Before the storm-cock tells that spring is nigh,
Before the first green bramble pushes shy,

And all the blood leaps at the lambling's notes,
The piping brought men's hearts into their throats.

Till all were stirred, however old and grand;
Generals bestarred, old statesmen, courtiers prim
(Whose lips kissed nothing but the Monarch's hand),
Stirred in their courtly minds recesses dim,
The sap of life stirred in the dreary limb.
The old eyes brightened o'er the pouncet-box,
Remembering loves, and brawls, and mains of cocks.

And through the town the liquid piping's gladness
Thrilled on its way, rejoicing all who heard,
To thrust aside their dullness or their sadness
And follow blithely as the fluting stirred
They hurried to the guild like horses spurred.
There in the road they mustered to await,
They knew not what, a dream, a joy, a fate.

And man to man in exaltation cried:
"Something has come to make us young again.
Wisdom has come, and Beauty, Wisdom's bride,
And youth like flowering April after rain."
But still the fluting piped and men were fain
To sing and ring the bells, they knew not why
Save that their hearts were in an ecstasy.

Then to the balcony above them came
King Cole the shining in his robe of flame;
Behind him came the Prince, who smiled and bowed.
King Cole made silence: then addressed the crowd.

"Friends, fellow mortals, bearers of the ghost
That burns, and breaks its lamp, but is not lost.
This day, for one brief hour, a key is given
To all, however poor, to enter heaven.
The Bringers Down of Beauty from the stars,
Have reached this city in their golden cars.
They ask, to bring you beauty, if you will.

You do not answer: rightly, you are still.
But you will come, to watch the image move
Of all you dreamed or had the strength to love.

Come to the Ring, the image of the path
That this our planet through the Heaven hath;
Behold man's skill, man's wisdom, man's delight,
And woman's beauty, imaged to the height.

Come, for our rulers come; and Death, whose feet
Tread at the door, permits a minute's sweet;
To each man's soul vouchsafes a glimpse, a gleam,
A touch, a breath of his intensest dream.
Now, to that glimpse, that moment, come with me;
Our rulers come.
O brother let there be
Such welcome to our Prince as never was.
Let there be flowers under foot, not grass,
Flowers and scented rushes and the sprays
Of purple bramble reddening into blaze.
Let there be bells rung backward till the tune

Be as the joy of all the bees in June.
Let float your flags, and let your lanterns rise
Like fruit upon the trees in Paradise,
In many-coloured lights as rich as Rome
O'er road and tent; and let the children come,
It is their world, these Beauty Dwellers bring."

Then, like the song of all the birds of spring
He played his flute, and all who heard it cried,
"Strew flowers before our rulers to the Ring."
The courtiers hurried for their coats of pride
The upturned faces in that market wide
Glowed in the sunset to a beauty grave
Such as the faces of immortals have.

And work was laid aside on desk and bench,
The red-lined ledger summed no penny more,
From lamp-blacked fingers the mechanic's wrench
Dropped to the kinking wheel chains on the floor,
The farmer shut the hen roost: at the store

The boys put up the shutters and ran hooting
Wild with delight in freedom to the fluting.

And now the fluting led that gathered tide
Of men and women forward through the town,
And flowers seemed to fall from every side,
White starry blossoms such as brooks bow down,
White petals clinging in the hair and gown;
And those who marched there thought that starry flowers
Grew at their sides, as though the streets were bowers.

And all, in marching, thought, "We go to see
Life, not the daily coil, but as it is
Lived in its beauty in eternity,
Above base aim, beyond our miseries;
Life that is speed and colour and bright bliss,
And beauty seen and strained for, and possest
Even as a star forever in the breast."

The fluting led them through the western gate,
From many a tossing torch their faces glowed,
Bright-eyed and ruddy-featured and elate;
They sang and scattered flowers upon the road,
Still in their hair the starry blossoms snowed;
They saw ahead the green-striped tent, their mark,
Lit now and busy in the gathering dark.

There at the vans and in the green-striped tent
The circus artists growled their discontent.
Close to the gate a lighted van there was;
The showman's wife thrust back its window glass.
And leaned her head without to see who came
To buy a ticket for the evening's game.

A roll of tickets and a plate of pence
(For change) lay by her as she leaned from thence.
She heard the crowd afar, but in her thought
She said: "That's in the city; it is nought.
They glorify the Queen."

Though sick at heart
She wore her spangles for her evening's part,
To dance upon the barebacked horse and sing.
Green velvet was her dress, with tinselling.
Her sad, worn face had all the nobleness
That lovely spirits gather from distress.

"No one to-night," she thought, "no one to-night."

Within the tent, a flare gave blowing light.
There, in their scarlet cart, the bandsmen tuned
Bugles that whinnied, flageolets that crooned
And strings that whined and grunted.

Near the band
Piebald and magpie horses stood at hand
Nosing at grass beneath the green-striped dome
While men caressed them with the curry-comb.

The clowns, with whited, raddled faces, heaped
Old horse cloths round them to the chins; they peeped

Above the rugs; their cigarette ends' light
Showing black eyes, and scarlet smears and white.

They watched the empty benches, and the wry
Green curtain door which no one entered by.

Two little children entered and sat still
With bright wide-opened eyes that stared their fill,
And red lips round in wonder smeared with tints
From hands and handkerchiefs and peppermints.

A farm lad entered. That was all the house.

"Strike up the band to give the folk a rouse,"
The showman said, "They must be all outside."
He said it boldly, though he knew he lied.

Sad as a funeral march for pleasure gone
The band lamented out, "He's got them on."
Then paused, as usual, for the crowd to come.

Nobody came, though from without a hum
Of instruments and singing slowly rose.
"Free feast, with fireworks and public shows,"
The bandsmen growled, "An empty house again.
Two children and a ploughboy and the rain.
And then a night march through the mud," they said.

Now to the gate, King Cole his piping played.
The showman's wife from out her window peering
Saw, in the road, a crowd with lanterns nearing,
And, just below her perch, a man who shone
As though white flame were his caparison;
One upon whom the great-eyed hawk-moths tense
Settled with feathery feet and quivering sense,
Till the white, gleaming robe seemed stuck with eyes.

It was the grinning glitterer, white and wise,
King Cole, who said, "Madam, the Court is here,

The Court, the Prince, the Queen, all drawing near,
We here, the vanguard, set them on their way.
They come intent to see your circus play.
They ask that all who wish may enter free,
And in their princely hope that this may be
They send you these plump bags of minted gold."
He gave a sack that she could scarcely hold.
She dropped it trembling, muttering thanks, and then
She cried: "O master, I must tell the men."

She rushed out of her van: she reached the Ring;
Called to her husband, "Will, the Queen and King,
Here at the very gate to see the show!"

"Light some more flares," said Will, "to make a glow.
'God save the Queen,' there, bandsmen; lively, boys.
Come on, 'God save our gracious'; make a noise.

Here, John, bring on the piebalds to the centre,
We'll have the horses kneeling as they enter."
All sang, and rushed. Without, the trumpets blared.

Now children, carrying paper lanterns, made
A glowing alley to the circus door;
Then others scattered flowers to pave a floor,
Along the highway leading from the town.

Rust-spotted bracken green they scattered down,
Blue cornflowers and withering poppies red,
Gold charlock, thrift, the purple hardihead,

Harebells, the milfoil white, September clover,
And boughs that berry red when summer's over,
All autumn flowers, with yellow ears of wheat.

Then with bruised, burning gums that made all sweet,
Came censer-bearing pages, and then came
Bearers in white with cressets full of flame,
Whose red tongues made the shadows dance like devils.
Then the blithe flutes that pipe men to the revels
Thrilled to the marrow softly as men marched.
Then, tossing leopard-skins from crests that arched,
The horses of the kettle-drummers stept.
Then with a glitter of bright steel there swept
The guard of knights, each pennon-bearer bold
Girt in a crimson cloak with spangs of gold.
Then came the Sword and Mace, and then the four
Long silver trumpets thrilling to the core
Of people's hearts their sound. Then two by two,

Proud in caparisons of kingly blue,
Bitted with bars of gold, in silver shod,
Treading like kings, cream-coloured stallions trod,
Dragging the carriage with the Prince and Queen.
The Corporation, walking, closed the scene.
Then came the crowd in-surging like the wave
That closes up the gash the clipper clave.

Swift in the path their majesties would tread
The showman flung green baize and turkey red.
Within the tent, with bunting, ropes and bags
They made a Royal Box festooned with flags.
Even as the Queen arrived, the work was done,
The seven piebald horses kneeled like one,
The bandsmen blew their best, while, red as beet,
The showman bowed his rulers to their seat.

Then, through the door, came courtiers wigged and
starred;
The crimson glitterers of the bodyguard;
The ladies of the Court, broad-browed and noble,

The Court, the Prince, the Queen, all drawing near,
We here, the vanguard, set them on their way.
They come intent to see your circus play.

Lovely as evening stars o'er seas in trouble;
The aldermen, in furs, with golden chains,
Old cottagers in smocks from country lanes,
Shepherds half dumb from silence on the down,
And merchants with their households from the town,
And, in the front, two rows of eager-hearted
Children with shining eyes and red lips parted.

Even as the creeping waves that brim the pool
One following other filled the circus full.

The showman stood beside his trembling wife.
"Never," he said, "in all our travelling life
Has this old tent looked thus, the front seats full
With happy little children beautiful.
Then all this glorious Court, tier after tier!
O would our son, the wanderer, were here,
Then we'd die happy!"
"Would he were!" said she.
"It was my preaching forced him to be free,"
The showman said.

"Ah, no," his wife replied,
"The great world's glory and the young blood's pride,
Those forced him from us, never you, my dear."

"I would be different if we had him here
Again," the showman said; "but we must start.
But all this splendour takes away my heart,
I am not used to playing to the King."

"Look," said his wife, "the stranger, in the Ring."

There in the Ring, indeed, the stranger stood,
King Cole, the shining, with his flute of wood,
Waiting until the chattering Court was stilled.

Then from his wooden flute his piping thrilled,
Then all was tense, and then the leaping fluting
Clamoured as flowering clamours for the fruiting.

And round the ring came Dodo, the brown mare,
Pied like a tiger-moth; her bright shoes tare
The scattered petals, while the clown came after
Like life, a beauty chased by tragic laughter.
The showman entered in and cracked his whip.

Then followed fun and skill and horsemanship,
Marvellous all, for all were at their best.
Never had playing gone with such a zest
To those good jesters; never had the tent
So swiftly answered to their merriment
With cheers, the artist's help, the actor's life.
Then, at the end, the showman and his wife
Stood at the entrance listening to the cheers.
They were both happy to the brink of tears.

King Cole came close and whispered in their ears:
"There is a soldier here who says he knew
You, long ago, and asks to speak to you.
A sergeant in the guard, a handsome blade."

"Mother!" the sergeant said. "What, Jack!" she said,
"Our son come back! look, father, here's our son!"

"Bad pennies do come home to everyone,"
The sergeant said. "And if you'll have me home,
And both forgive me, I'll be glad to come."

"Why, son," the showman said, "the fault was ours."

Now a bright herald trod across the flowers
To bid the artists to the Queen and King,
Who thanked them for the joyful evening,
And shook each artist's hand with words of praise.
"Our happiest hour," they said, "for many days.
You must perform at Court at Christmas tide."

They left their box: men flung the curtains wide,
The horses kneeled like one as they withdrew.

And round the ring came Dodo, the brown mare,
Pied like a tiger-moth; her bright shoes tare
The scattered petals, while the clown came after
Like life, a beauty chased by tragic laughter.

They reached the curtained door and loitered through.
The audience, standing, sang "God save the Queen."
The hour of the showman's life had been.

Now once again a herald crossed the green
To tell the showman that a feast was laid,
A supper for the artists who had played
By the Queen's order, in a tent without.

In the bright moonlight at the gate the rout
Of courtiers, formed procession to be gone,
Orders were called, steel clinked, and jewels shone,
The watchers climbed the banks and took their stands.

The circus artists shook each others' hands,
Their quarrels were forgotten and forgiven,
Old friendships were restored and sinners shriven.
"We find we cannot part from Will," they said.

And while they talked the juggler took the maid
Molly, the singer, to the hawthorn glade
Behind the green-striped tent, and told his love,
A wild delight, beyond her hope, enough
Beyond her dream to brim her eyes with tears.

Now came a ringing cry to march; and cheers
Rose from the crowd; the bright procession fared
Back to the city while the trumpets blared.

So the night ended, and the Court retired.
Back to the town the swaying torches reeked,
Within the green-striped tent the lights expired,
The dew dript from the canvas where it leaked.
Dark, in the showman's van, a cricket creaked,
But, near the waggons, fire was glowing red
On happy faces where the feast was spread.

Gladly they supped, those artists of the show;
Then by the perfect moon, together timed,

They struck the green-striped tent and laid it low,
Even as the quarter before midnight chimed.
Then putting-to the piebald nags, they climbed
Into their vans and slowly stole away
Along Blown Hilcote on the Icknield Way.

And as the rumbling of the waggons died
By Aston Tirrold and the Moretons twain,
With axle-clatter in the countryside,
Lit by the moon and fragrant from the rain,
King Cole moved softly in the Ring again,
Where now the owls and he were left alone:
The night was loud with water upon stone.

He watched the night; then taking up his flute,
He breathed a piping of this life of ours,
The half-seen prize, the difficult pursuit,
The passionate lusts that shut us in their towers,
The love that helps us on, the fear that lowers,
The pride that makes us and the pride that mars,
The beauty and the truth that are our stars.

And man, the marvellous thing, that in the dark
Works with his little strength to make a light,
His wit that strikes, his hope that tends, a spark,
His sorrow of soul in toil, that brings delight,
His friends, who make salt sweet and blackness bright,
His birth and growth and change; and death the wise,
His peace, that puts a hand upon his eyes.

All these his pipings breathed of, until twelve
Struck on the belfry tower with tremblings numb
(Such as will shudder in the axe's helve
When the head strikes) to tell his hour was come.
Out of the living world of Christendom
He dimmed like mist till one could scarcely note
The robins nestling to his old grey coat.

Dimmer he grew, yet still a glimmering stayed
Like light on cobwebs, but it dimmed and died.
Then there was naught but moonlight in the glade,

Moonlight and water and an owl that cried.
Far overhead a rush of birds' wings sighed,
From migrants going south until the spring.
The night seemed fanned by an immortal wing.

But where the juggler trudged beside his love
Each felt a touching from beyond our ken,
From that bright kingdom where the souls who strove,
Live now forever, helping living men.
And as they kissed each other; even then
Their brows seemed blessed, as though a hand unseen
Had crowned their loves with never-withering green.

from
Newbegins
San Francisco